



Vigo students have equipment to help prepare them for life after high school

By Sue Loughlin
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TERRE HAUTE— Vigo County School Corp. career and technical education has a new look and new equipment that will better prepare students for college and the work force.

Terre Haute North Vigo, South Vigo and West Vigo high schools have been conducting open houses this month to display their new equipment and other improvements.

The program benefited from \$1 million in money generated through bond refinancing, said Doug Dillion, Vigo County School Corp. director of career and technical education.

The major focus has been new equipment “that brings us more up to an industry standard,” he said. For example, machine trade/manufacturing programs now have state-of-the-art Haas Computer Numerical Controlled machines similar to what is used in industry.

Previous equipment “was so outdated it wasn’t even similar to what is now used in industry,” Dillion said. Now, students will be better prepared for the work force, and better yet, there are good-paying jobs with Wabash Valley employers.

“There are jobs in advanced manufacturing, but not many people are going into it,” Dillion said.

Too often, parents and students have an outdated image of manufacturing that doesn’t reflect today’s reality. They think of dingy factories where their work clothes will be dirty and greasy by the end of the day.

“It’s just not that way anymore,” Dillion said. Advanced manufacturing is typically a high-tech, automated process “where you watch through a glass door and a machine does the work,” he said.

Through the open houses, Dillion hopes to start changing that image and encouraging more students to try the career/technical programs.

The School Board and Superintendent Dan Tanoos have strongly supported the career/technical programs and additional investment in them, he said.

At West Vigo’s open house Jan. 16, students Dustin Flowers and Ridgley Smith were making key chains to demonstrate use of a CNC mill. Rather than use their hands, they set up computer programs that told a robot and the machinery what to do.

“It takes more time to learn it and program it and make sure everything runs right,” said Smith, a senior.

“It’s more fun to use once you figure it out and know what you’re doing.”

Tommy Thornton, who teaches machine trades at West Vigo, believes the new, advanced machinery will help generate interest in the program and open up career possibilities for students. “This is a big positive,” he said.

There is a huge market for machinists, Thornton said, and students have the opportunity to enter the job market and find good jobs right after graduation.

Among those attending the West Vigo open house was Tammy Marion, co-owner of Marion Tool in West Terre Haute. The company is always looking for qualified machinists, she said.

The company, which employs 33 people, does precision CNC machining that includes parts and components for everything from the aerospace to automotive industries.

She hopes the new equipment and training at the high schools will develop potential employees for the company. Her husband will work with Thornton to let students know about the opportunities available. The company employs people in such areas as machine operators; programming; engineering and

quality control.

Other local companies with opportunities in the machine trades/manufacturing include Unison Engine Components (formerly Smiths Aerospace) and Britt Tool. Some companies will not only hire graduates, but also provide scholarships for them to pursue postsecondary education.

"There is a demand and there are quality jobs for them," Dillion said.

Terre Haute South conducted its open house and curriculum fair Thursday. There, staff and student Johnson Dang demonstrated a new state-of-the-art automated manufacturing cell that includes three robots, a large conveyor and a Haas CNC mill.

Steve Joseph, South's technology department chairman, said the new equipment "is a great step in the right direction. No longer are we several years behind industry on cutting edge technology. We're getting closer now. We're getting a lot of industrial partners working with us," he said.

He lives in Paris, Ill., and said a company there has told him they'll hire students right out of high school if they have experience on CNC machines. Upon graduation, students could earn \$12 to \$15 per hour and eventually earn more with experience and additional education.

"This equipment is absolutely fantastic," Joseph said. "The kids are loving it and our instructors are excited. It's putting some fresh air into a program that really should be leading education as far as I'm concerned."

Dang, a South freshman, described the new equipment as "amazing."

Joseph said the South career/technical program also is able to use its 3-D Rapid Prototyper to make plastic prototypes for industry that saves companies a lot of money and time. One company it has worked with is D & D Automation.

New equipment also has been bought for Project Lead the Way, a nationally recognized program with a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for postsecondary opportunities in the engineering field.

All three schools have started offering some Project Lead the Way classes, and complete program sequences will begin next year. Students who complete the sequences can receive credit at some four-year colleges.

Career/technical programs have undergone other changes as well, including some of the following:

- All three high schools have updated food labs.
- All three have CNC plasma cutters, which are used to cut steel in certain manufacturing and welding processes.
- All three also have CNC gantry routers, which could be used in the manufacture of wood furniture and cabinetry.
- South has revamped its marketing lab, which now has an Epilog laser cutter/engraver; vinyl sign machine; SMART technology; and new computers and furniture. This spring, North will benefit from improvements to its marketing lab.

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Photos



A precision instrument: Terre Haute South freshman Johnson Dang, 15, shows off the engraving capabilities of the school's new computer numerical control mill Thursday during a technical education open house at South. The Tribune-Star



Carving into the future: Terre Haute South junior Jordan Taylor operates a plasma cam as welding technology teacher Gregg Dillion looks on Thursday during a technical education open house at South. The Tribune-Star



Into the future: Terre Haute North student David Wallace, along with South student Jordan Taylor and North student Levi Campbell watch the robotic arm of the school's new computer integrated manufacturing lab move a piece of plastic during the technical education open house Thursday at South. The Tribune-Star